



# WATER POLITICS IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BIHAR & NEPAL

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## ABSTRACT

A review of the written work on water in South Asia reveals that this region is highly prone to water related crises. This is perpetuated by the fact that the region is largely agrarian, and it is also water scarce. The situation is compounded by volatile relations between the countries in the region. To make a joint water management more effective, it would be helpful to include people from different strata of society as-it-could help in minimizing risks that could adversely affect the lives of common people in the long term. Multi-stakeholders here would be the private Section, the state government, representatives of civil society and experts on dams who consider the ecological and social aspects. India is in a delicate position because it is the middle riparian between Nepal and Bangladesh, and it wants to avoid accusations of it being a big bully in the region. In the case of India and Bangladesh, the issue has not been the scarcity of water leading to conflict but the lack of political will on both sides that has proved a detriment in resolving the sharing of resources. In their case, if there had been no political intransigence, the issue might never have escalated the way it historically has. It seems like when it comes to water problems, often, the problem is the lack of a political consensus. This consensus can be marred by many problems that the two countries are dealing with. Even though, water has the potential to present critical problems between countries, at this point, it might be more helpful to situate the water issue within the entire spectrum of bilateral ties of the spectrum.

**KEYWORDS:** Water Politics, intransigence, stakeholders, volatile.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Water politics sometimes called hydro politics, is politics affected by the availability of water and water resources, a necessity for all life forms and human development. The first use of this term hydro politics, came in the book by John Waterbury, entitled Hydro politics of the Nile Valley, Syracuse University Press, 1979. The availability of drinking water per capita is inadequate and shrinking world-wide. The causes, related to both quantity and quality, are many and varied; they include local scarcity, limited availability, and population pressures, but also human activities of mass consumption, misuse environment degradation water pollution as well as climatic change. Water's essential nature makes it a strategic natural resource globally and, in its absence, an important element of political conflicts in many areas, historically. With decreasing availability and increasing demand for water some have predicted that clean water will become the next oil making countries like Canada, Chile, Norway, Columbia, and Peru with this resource in abundance, the water rich countries in the world. The UN World Water Development Report (WWDR, 2003) from the World Water Assessment Programme indicates that, in the next 20 years the quantity of water available to everyone is predicted to decrease by 30%. Currently, 40% of the World's inhabitants have insufficient fresh water for minimal hygiene. More than 2.2 million people died in 2000 from diseases related to the consumption of contaminated water or drought. Fresh Water now more precious than ever for its extensive use in agriculture, high-tech manufacturing, and energy production is increasingly receiving attention as a resource requiring better management and sustainable use. Riparian water rights and associated issues like global warming and desertification have become issues in international diplomacy, World Bank in addition to regional water rights and politics. President Ismail Serageldin predicted "Many of the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was about oil, but wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be over water. Most importantly, fresh water is fundamental requirement of all living organisms, crops, livestock, and human being included. The UNDP considers access to it a basic human right and a prerequisite for peace. Un Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated in 2001 "Access to safe water is a fundamental human need and, therefore a basic right. Contaminated water jeopardizes both the physical and social health for all people. It is an affront to human dignity." With increased development, many industries, including forestry, agriculture, mining manufacturing and recreation require sizable additional amounts of fresh water to operate. This, however, has led to increase in air and water pollution, which in turn have reduced the quality of water supply. More sustainable development practices are advantageous and necessary. According to the WHO, each human being requires a bare minimum of 20 liters of fresh water per day for basic hygiene.

### 1.1 Rationale of the Study:

Water's is crucial to life and survival, and concerns of sharing and managing this finite element in India has been generating a lot of heat. At collecting one level, are issues that are causally linked to the fact that there is "water crisis" looming over the region. It is a reality that usage of water resources have reached or far exceeded the limits of sustainability in most of the states in India. Rapid growth of population, urbanization and mega cities, industries, mining, intensive and agriculture has combined with inefficient use of water, to ensure that water is fast becoming a scarce resource-both in terms of quantity and quality. This has fueled

conflicts between different uses and users of between states within countries, and across countries. With the possibility of devastating impact of climate, the change, and the severe shortage of fresh water projected as projected by the inter-governmental Panel on Climate change, the situation is likely to take the catastrophic turn. In India alone, gross per capita water availability is stated to decline from around 1,820 cubic meters a year to as low as around 1,140 cubic meters a year in 2050 (IPCC, 4<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report). To begin with, it must be stated the purpose of the study is not to give credence to the water war" theses. Indeed, wars continue to be fought over oil and not water. The study is in the understanding that peace is not simply the absence of war, but a value grounded in issues of human security and collective wellbeing of the region. From such a perspective, there have been several reasons to why this study was undertaken at this juncture in India.

1. Water insecurity is all pervasive in the region, visible in conflicts and tensions erupting within and across countries. Hence the need to integrate water security as key component of human security is crucial.
2. The question of sharing, and management of inter-state water continues to be an irritant in any attempts to build peace and cooperation in the region. The fact that all South Asian countries lack a regional framework for ecological/water governance only magnifies conflicts/points. As the case stands, the governance of trans boundary rivers has been carried out through bilateral treaties signed by different countries and India treaties that themselves have been sites of conflict
3. Of late, our respective governments have been talking about regional cooperation, and peace'. And yet a closer look reveals that what is being imposed from above as regional peace and cooperation are attempts to hollow out both values and give them minimalist content. At one level, (despite the rhetoric of peace) the dominant discourse remains in region remains one of 'security defined in narrow militarized term as national security and as a thing apart from human or resource security. At another level, regional cooperation/peace/integration in South Asia is increasingly getting defined in economic terms, dictated by neo-liberal market agenda

### Consequently:

- a. There is a push to perceive water as an 'economic good' a tradable commodity to be left to the market forces an approach that then influences how water to utilized and shared in the region where India and Indian business dominate, Such approach threatens the recognition of water as a common pool resource as a human right vital for survival, and as an environmental resource to be protected and treated with the principle of sustainability.
- b. An ascendancy of market discourse has already meant an increased role of business groups as legitimate players, and marginalization of civil society actors at the regional level. Indeed, as the study revealed, South Asian civil society networking on water (as well as host of other issues)

has been an all-time low in this phase. Clearly, the battle in much of South Asia to establish a framework for water governance that is fair, equitable, and environmentally sound is far from over.

These various factors form the rationale of this attempt to explore, from the perspective of the people and civil society the possibility of bringing the question of fair and sustainable trans-boundary water governance right back to questions of peace and cooperation in South Asia. Indeed, the case for South Asian water governance, specifically and ecological governance at large has never been as strong as urgent as now with growing impact of global warming.

### 1.2 Research Objectives of the Study:

The four-specific objective of this study are:

1. To understand and bring out the issues that plague boundary water disputes between India its neighboring countries Bihar and Nepal.
2. To understand initiatives or lack of it regarding water sharing and management.
3. To identify alternative approaches and the possible action points for future intervention.
4. To bring out peace and harmony in the country,

### 1.3 Research Question:

- a. What are the factors which can lead to conflicts over water resource sharing particularly when there is scarcity?
- b. What is the existing status of disputes between Bihar and Nepal over water sharing?
- c. Can these be transformed into armed conflicts in future?
- d. What are its various implications?
- e. What is the way out for cooperation in sharing water resources?

The study is preliminary in nature. Given the limited time and resources and the wide range of issues that emerge at the interface of water and border politics, the study confines itself to its objective and to South Asian countries Nepal, And Bangladesh. The river dispute related to Bihar has been taken care of. However, the study was chosen keeping in mind various factors,

1. History of water disputes and its settlement between the states and surrounding state or country
2. Politicizations of water by each state or country and its cross-boundary implications,
3. Civil society action of each states regarding water disputes.
4. Accessibility to the region within this limited time and resource. I View

### 2. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

This is a scoping study, and in that sense, it is aimed to achieve depth of coverage. It has been recognized that there is need to address the issues of politics of water, conflict, and peace from regional perspective, to enable:

1. The development of effective civil society initiatives on the question of governance of trans-boundary water at this juncture in the region.
2. To inform and link the question of water security to the ongoing debate of regional peace. The specific objective of this study is three-fold:
  - (1) To understand and bring out the issues that plague boundary water. disputers between India its neighboring countries with special reference Bihar and Nepal
  - (2) To identify initiatives and lack of it with regard to water sharing and management.
3. To identify alternatives approaches and the possible action for future intervention
4. To bring out peace and harmony in the country.

Using the scoping study methodology, rather than specific and research focused questions the work began with some broad enquiry on the trans-boundary rivers from three vintage points:

1. Common history

2. Ruptures
3. People's Suffering

These were then used as the axis to probe through a body of literature to develop a more sharpened research design and conduct field work.

### 2.1 Literary Method:

The study of this nature depended upon both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were generated with the help of questionnaires and schedules. Secondary sources were generated from electronic database, using reference list in library, published document and report of journals and newspapers.

### 2.2 Mapping the field:

The study involved downloading through internet electronic qualitative interview with the key stakeholders, such as relevant govt. Officials activists, academics working in the field and media persons.

### 2.3 Scope:

The scope of the study was limited to inter-state water sharing conflicts as well as intra-state conflicts. It included

1. History of water disputes and its settlement between the states and surrounding states or country.
2. Politicization of water by each state and its cross-boundary implications.
3. Civil society action of each states regarding water disputes.

### 3. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY:

There seems to be a lack of written work on water conservation in South Asia, which is very a glaring discrepancy, because there is so much wastage of water. An important point that comes out very clearly in the published work is that water issues in the region are really a product of the political relations in the region. If the relations between the countries would have been better, water issues would not have been so intractable. This is an exceptionally good indicator of the way that the countries in the region need to work on ameliorating their political relations and increasing the flows of information, measures between the nations, which could be taken without much effort by the nations. Cooperation among the countries can play a two-pronged role of resolving various water issues between the countries and in the process also enhancing relations. There are various ways that the nations could collaborate One way of doing that would be developing joint water management solutions, development of information sharing mechanisms, disaster preparation and maintenance of a specific quality of water in the region. India along with the smaller countries must think of creating new avenues for cooperation. There seems to be a lack of written work on water conservation in South Asia, which is very a glaring discrepancy, because there is so much wastage of water. An important point that comes out very clearly in the published work is that water issues in the region are really a product of the political relations in the region. If the relations between the countries would have been better, water issues would not have been so intractable. This is an exceptionally good indicator of the way that the countries in the region need to work on ameliorating their political relations and increasing the flows of information, measures between the nations, which could be taken without much effort by the nations. Cooperation among the countries can play a two-pronged role of resolving various water issues between the countries and in the process also enhancing relations. There are various ways that the nations could collaborate One way of doing that would be developing joint water management solutions, development of information sharing mechanisms, disaster preparation and maintenance of a specific quality of water in the region. India along with the smaller countries must think of creating new avenues for cooperation. The history of the evolution of Indian Water Law reveals that water law is not only linked with social, religious, and economic development but also with the rise and fall of emperor. In a report on the Indus Water Treaty Suba Chandran talks about a collaborative effort between India, Pakistan Nepal, Bangladesh, and China, to study the Himalayan glaciers as they are the source from where the rivers affecting all these countries, originate he history In a report on the Indus Water Treaty Suba Chandran talks about a collaborative effort between India, Pakistan Nepal, Bangladesh, and China, to study the Himalayan glaciers as they are the source from where the rivers affecting all these countries, originate.

### 3.1 Looking Forward: Framework for Water Governance a space of inclusion:

There is an urgent need for a water governance framework in South Asia. This is important if there has to be a meaningful implementation of the SAARC social charter signed by all the South Asian countries, stating the need to "Fulfill the responsibility towards present and future generations by ensuring equity among generations, and protecting the integrity and sustainable use of the environment." This is also necessary if we have reach anywhere close to achieving the Millennium Development Goals or talk about peace, cooperation, and well-being of the region in a maxima list sense.

Such a framework must emerge from the recognition that there are pluralities of

stakeholders in the contested terrain of water, and among them the civil society is so far excluded when it comes to the issue of transboundary Water. The process of water governance must shift from top- down water management to bottom-up water governance and should be an open and transparent process should look to building decentralized partnerships with non- state institutions. Governance implies open and equal interplay between state market and civil society. As of now, the civil society and local communities has been totally excluded from water management. This must change.

Water security means people have secured right to the water including future generations. For poor people, this comes from fair and adequate representation in policy- making process. Hence the bottom-up approach must be integral to the process and the outcome. For instance, it should be designed through consultations with local communities which are affected and build upon the strengths of customary laws that are often overlooked. There is a need to improve our understanding of the strengths of customary water arrangements (whilst recognizing their weaknesses, such as gender/caste inequality).

There is also needed to include marginal river ecologies that remain neglected, such as the case of smaller border river between India and Nepal. Similarly, the India-Pakistan conflict has cast a security' shadow over the Indus basin. While there are several studies from varied perspectives on the Ganga basin, most studies on the Indus basin tend to be more from a strategic or nation state perspective. There is an urgent need to bring forth these varied voices, visions of people and communities of the Indus basin, across borders, to inform the debate on water governance.

Women play a crucial role in sustainable development, resource governance, and in peace building. As of now, both the level of government policy makers as well as civil society, women actors and gender perspective are both missing. Similarly, the question on discrimination and proactive efforts for inclusion of the voices and visions of Dalits and other discriminated communities must also be taken into account.

There is also needed to develop joint information infrastructures and services for river basins, and thereby reducing asymmetric access information among the countries concerned.

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